

Three London Cameos

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I—The Comedy of London

THE court is stuffy, but the people are stuffier, it is all close and crowded and complicated. The magistrate is a stuffy old gentleman with an official voice; the usher is a stuffy old gentleman with an official voice; so is the clerk; so are the solicitors and the barristers.

There are, of course, degrees or qualities of stuffiness about them. His Worship, in addition to whiskers, wears a respectable black tie with a pearl pin in it; the usher looks dismal in a kind of shroud; the clerk is—just a clerk; the legal lights are as dim and obscure as possible—and scrupulously untidy. Except for the smart young policemen sitting in rows along a bench, there is an air of frowsiness about the place. Just as if the windows had never been opened, and all the people in court had never been out of court, but had passed their lives there—which, as looks go, they might very well have done.

"Victor Erasmus Charles Stuart Fish, No. 8 charge," calls out the goaler, and an infant of lively mien but diminutive stature (with an unmistakable squint) steps into the dock. His large head barely shows above the rail, his small body assumes a jocular pose of devil-may-care bravado.

It seems that this young person has "pinched" the amount of one pound seven-and-sixpence, entrusted to him by a too-confiding employer. It seems that he divided the "wag" among picture palaces, tripe-and-onions and a revolver. It seems that he is quite unrepentant, rather impertinent, and won't go to a training ship. The little missionary with the amiable terrier-face and high color is worried. The clerk, the goaler and the usher look severe. Victor Erasmus remains simply defiant.

The magistrate glares at him through gold-rimmed pince-nez. "You are a wicked and foolish boy," he says; "but this time I will take your father's recognizances for your good behavior for six months." "Pip—pip!" ejaculates Victor as he cocks his cap on the side of his head. "Cheer—oh, Vic!" comes a breezy answer from the back of the court. And out he goes.

Bacchus is in great force. The fellow is responsible for a long string of victims whose offences vary in degree but not in kind. These are elderly, decent-looking men, and young, offensive-looking men; there are somewhat dilapidated ladies wearing tweed caps, and somewhat fashionable ladies wearing feathered hats; there is a noisy sort of person, and a depressed, watery sort of person. There are all sorts of persons—dozens of them.

And there are interruptions. Somebody has a

wife at the back of the court. She is immense; she wears an apron and a cap, and carries a fish-basket. Out of the crowd, "behind the barrier," comes the voice of Billingsgate:

"Let me speak for usband, if you please, sir. 'E 'ad a glass of ale wiv 'is brother-in-law at the corner 'uss; then when 'e come outside 'e met a bloke what owed him fourpence, and 'e says to 'im, 'e says, 'Bert, what yer done wiv that money you owes me—?'"

"Silence!" thunders the usher; "if you want to come and give evidence, step up here."

There are numerous incidents of that sort. And there is a plaintive lady in a poke bonnet who objects to her neighbor's parrot. . . .

Also there is a beastly affair about a vegetable barrow. "Was I obstructing the road then?" shouts the dirty fellow in the neckerchief.

"Yus—you was," replies the witness bluntly; "you got yer barrer in the light, and none of us couldn't get past."

"You're a liar!" remarks the accused.

"I'll chuck me boot at yer 'ead if yer says that again"—and so it goes on. The Cockney's cross-examination has all the essentials of a free fight.

It is a fine official comedy on the whole. There are people, of course, in the long stream that passes by who look miserable, and plead and cry; but most of the culprits are either business-like or disposed to have a joke. There is even a frock-coated thief, who delicately picks his nails while the magistrate sends him to hard labor for six months.

II—The Tragedy of London.

Within a great white building, a spacious marble hall full of people. Massive pillars and domes of glass, and two broad staircases leading up to it; glass doors and white paint and oak-panelling everywhere like a king's palace. Nothing in particular to show what kind of a place it is—nothing indeed so gloomy as its name.

London's hum within and without. Police officers guarding doors, lawyers in wig-and-gown bustling through the crowd, men of official shape elbowing lesser men out of and into corners. Groups of people standing about the hall talking in low voices. Black the pervading tone. Suspense the prevailing note.

Seen through a glass darkly—thick glass double doors guarded by a policeman—the sitting court looks like some scene in a drama. A beam of pale winter sunshine, descending through the dome of the roof, sets the dust dancing, and lights up the square symmetrical room with its wainscotted, white-painted walls. It touches the faces of the clerks sitting at their table, and pleasantly kindles those of the jumbled officials in the well of the court. Standing out by itself in the middle, a great roomy dock, beneath a gallery, from which peer down curious faces,

chiefly of women, enthralled by the story of "real life" unfolded before them. Opposite sit the jury—twelve stolid Englishmen.

Words come dimly through the plated door as the lips of the speakers move. Keen faces line the legal benches. The judge, in scarlet robes, sits beneath the sword of justice. On either side of him a florid city alderman. The clerk of arraigns lolls back in his green leather chair—a chubby man in wig-and-gown. 'Tis he who, when the jury return into court after considering their verdict, puts the eternal question: "Do you find the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty?"

The other little clerks run to and fro like busy wasps, some of them fat and pompous, others small, spruce youths in tight, smart suits, wearing flowers in their buttonholes. The sharp young lawyers—who haven't briefs, but like to think they have—drop in and out, and as the case draws to its close, group themselves around the dock. There is many a joke, wink and nod among them indeed, everybody is on the best possible terms with everybody else, from the police sergeant at the door to the usher beside the witness box. The witness box! In it stands a woman white and small and thin, in shiny black, clutching a little handkerchief. Such red streaming eyes, such a beaten look. . . .

Sitting beside the dock, another poor thing holding the witness' baby. Her frayed cape and hat trimmed with woebegone flowers, form a contrast to the quietly sumptuous robes and the quietly sumptuous room. She, too, is weeping, while the baby laughs and crows.

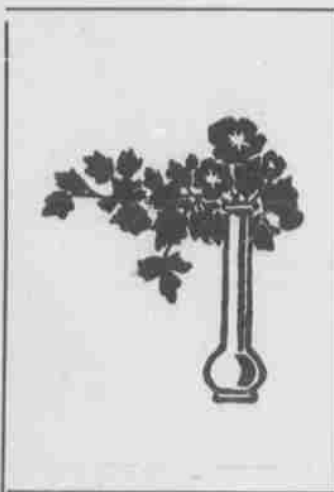
And in the great square dock? A starved-looking bit of a man, collarless and unshaven, huddled up on a chair, his chalky face strained forward to catch every word that passes. Who is he? What is he charged with? Somebody whispers murder.

That ragged wretch, now moistening his lips, now taking a sip at the water beside him, now leaning forward to whisper in the ear of the seedy little solicitor beneath; that pallid slip, with his watery eyes and weak face and weaker body, just like a thousand other wasters of London streets—could he be a murderer?

The glass grows darker, the picture fades. There are four courts, and in each one a scene like that. Chips and odds and ends and rags and wrack of human life—just everywhere. Despair, hope, hate, pain under that glass roof, and no word of pity. Sly humor in the lawyers' faces, a tired philosopher upon the judgment seat. The winter sunlight shines on them all.

III—The Archives of London

Muffled footfalls in the world of books. Silent people tripping lightly to and fro across a deadened floor. Silent men and women poring, poring over heavily-bound volumes in the subdued au-



GOLD LAKE, IN THE HEART OF WILD AND PICTU